

NATO Veterans' Organization of Canada – a New Look by a New Member

Introduction

Having been asked to speak to individual members of the executive and offer some suggestions for NVOC, I developed a series of questions. I did not use these scientifically, as in an opinion survey: rather they were simply a guideline or start point for me. Each conversation went wherever it took us, and found its own logical direction as it went along. Thus, this is a very subjective exploration, as both the questions, and my comments below, are shaped as much by my experience and assumptions as by the conversations I had with each executive.

I did find strong commonality among the opinions of members of the executive. This is common, as like-minded people join a volunteer organization, and stay with it when they continue to share the fundamental tenets or objectives of the organization. This harmony provides strength and endurance to the organization. It has a down-side, however, as the group may reinforce the shared viewpoint to such an extent that they all fail to see things that are quite obvious to outsiders. Thus, a range of perspectives is often what keeps an organization vibrant, dynamic, and in tune with the larger environment within which it must connect to outsiders – whether potential members (if growth is desired) or persons and organizations (such as politicians or the media) that are essential to effect or at least to influence the organization's objectives. Different perspectives can still support a strong organization, especially when all discussion remains respectful, and when agreed overarching objectives and methods provide an overall unity of effort.

Following are several topic areas that were touched on in our discussions. Again, these may or may not have been asked of a specific executive member. I am not so bold as to call the last paragraph (comment) in each section a conclusion; I would simply label it an observation that I reached concerning the title question after my series of discussions. At the end of the document, my concluding page does propose some ideas for how the executive might wish to proceed.

What's in a Name?

A name should announce something about the organization, and provide an accurate sense to the casual observer about what the organization does, or stands for. Ideally, the name draws potential members towards it, and gives a broad sense of welcome and purpose. In today's crowded and noisy public media environment, a name that is catchy or memorable can help sustain public attention, or the focus of a target individual, such as a politician or journalist.

The name NATO Veterans' Organization of Canada fulfills some of these functions. It also offers the advantage of standing a bit apart from a plethora of website names that all have the word veteran in them. For veterans of the Cold War era, many of air force and army origin having lived in Germany, and most sailors having deployed on NATO task forces for extended periods, the word NATO perhaps evokes memories of a mainstay or even pinnacle of their

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military career. Younger veterans have served under NATO command in the Balkans and in Afghanistan – however for them I suggest the NATO name will not be as positive. It more likely represents a higher political headquarters from which unrealistic mandates or restrictions and inadequate support are issued, much as the word ‘Ottawa has decided...’ is an expletive in many barrack room or mess hall conversations. The secondary title, or what I would call the tag line: ‘Voice of today’s veterans’ is a good one – my concern with it is whether it is a justified claim by an organization has only 300 members out of a veteran community of....a few hundred thousand- but it is certainly evocative and is a laudable aspiration. I might quibble and suggest modern veteran or new veteran, just to leverage language that is used by VAC and others.

Comment: It is clear that NVOC has already invested time and effort in the NATO brand, so it makes sense to maintain it for the recruiting campaign that is about to begin, with two caveats: recruiters should be briefed thoroughly to explain at every opportunity that the CF commitments to NATO over the decades have been far more substantial than those to peacekeeping, (i.e. if you ever served in the CF, you were serving NATO) and that Canada gains enormous credit and value from belonging to this exclusive, powerful, and fractious club. Secondly, recruiters (and all members) should constantly be testing perceptions of the NATO name, to see if it is in fact a deterrent to joining, or a strong attractor. Certainly, when the current recruiting campaign has wound down (2015? 2016?), a more rigorous testing of the market place reaction to this name should be mounted.

What is the Purpose – Strategic Aim

The transition from a focus on long-term care to support for VAC’s VIP programme is key and broadly supported by the executive. The intention to continue conversations with VAC over the New Veterans’ Charter is clear, and potentially a review of amendments to the charter this fall will give the NVOC a focus of attention and a highly visible ‘issue’ to pursue, both to influence government policy, and to tell potential members, directly and/or through the media, what NVOC can and does achieve.

A generalized aim of speaking for or perhaps representing all new veterans (i.e. those who have served in the CF after the Korean War) is the closest I came to hearing an overarching purpose or mission statement or strategic aim. This seems reasonable, but it might merit some scrutiny to find a standard, dynamic and crisp statement that adds to the brand.

Comment: a focussed discussion on crafting a strong mission statement would be useful, both as an exercise to re-examine purpose, main lines of operation (and sequencing), scale of ambition (and degree of effort), and for the value of the statement that it would produce. Attempts should be made to start with a very broad scan of the environment, both of today and into the future, to ensure the broadest possible viewpoint initially. I scanned the website, including the ‘object’ paragraph; there is much of value here, but a re-examination and re-statement might be of use.

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What Has Been Accomplished So Far? What Successes?

This is probably a common question from someone who has been approached to join or listen to any organization. My research did not find significant accomplishments or success stories, although there was an assertion that NVOC had a part to play in DND's rapid reversal of its decision to allocate lesser rates of danger pay to CF members serving in parts of Afghanistan other than Kandahar. Modesty will do the organization no good: if there are notable accomplishments, they should be front and centre on website and other promotional material, and on the lips of all representatives of NVOC. The relationship with VAC, including the minister's office was mentioned several times; this is clearly a result of hard work, deliberate choice of avoiding a confrontational approach, and deserves a lot of credit. However, it is not something that can be proclaimed without harming the relationship in the future – and if the relationship is good, what results has it achieved?

Comment

An alternative solution to the question of what has been accomplished is simply what is NVOC working on at present, e.g. the current priority effort is to advocate with VAC for improvements to the NVC. Letting a potential member know that NVOC is engaged on a current issue (or issues) would be almost as effective as stating what has been achieved in the past.

Who is the Target Audience? Why Would I Join?

Cohorts of military veterans tend to be smaller – of shorter time spans – than in civilian occupations, because of the transitory work life, and the fragmentation of the personnel among many services, tribes or regions. If the focus is to be on issues for aging veterans, such as VIP programme, then it will be very hard to interest anyone under 50, as they cannot yet envision their future need for such services. The younger (Afghanistan) veteran, with visible or invisible injuries or not, might be interested if part of the NVOC's purpose were tailored to their contemporary issues, such as entering the civilian job market, raising a family, seeking higher education (for self or children), or building/repairing a relationship with a spouse, the extended family, or community organizations – i.e. re-integration into a civilian lifestyle, which has been an issue for some.

Comment. It is hard to determine which should be established first – the purpose or mission statement, or the target market for membership. Whichever is defined first, it **MUST** be re-examined after the other is defined, to ensure there is a very good fit between the two. I suggest this needs to be a routine function of the executive – perhaps on an annual basis.

Who Else is Out There? Are They Partners or Competitors?

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The Legion and ANAVETS were mentioned frequently, with the Legion clearly being a partner, especially with its capacity to provide service officers to help veterans navigate the benefits programme available to them. Two UN veteran's organizations have been mentioned, and appear to be waning in strength or influence. Previous tensions among some or all of these organizations seem to be waning, possibly presenting an opportunity for better collaboration in the near future.

Several websites proclaim veteran agendas: vtncanada.org; vetscanada.org; veteransofcanada.ca; veteranvoice.info/. Presumably these are newer organizations than those in the preceding paragraph. cursory examination suggests that they are also more narrowly focussed. It is good to see links to some of these on the website; I suggest all possible links should be there, if agreed by the other organization.

Comment

I simply did not get a clear impression of whether or not executive members want to become closer collaborators with other agencies. I understand that relations have improved recently with some other agencies. As all or most of the established agencies face a diminishing clientele, it seems NVOC would gain (a little) by demonstrating its willingness to work with them, and perhaps absorb them when their shrinking numbers make their operations unsustainable. However, the bigger opportunity, albeit with greater challenges, is the clientele of the younger, single-issue and sometimes activist/agitator organizations, existing completely or entirely on the web. NVOC might consider having a small team do a detailed 'intelligence assessment' of all known organizations, and provide to the executive recommendations for the NVOC approach towards each and every one: eg ignore, seek to collaborate on a specific issue, build a generally positive relationship without any explicit collaboration, or suggest a long-term relationship (or even eventual merger) if there were to be a huge commonality of interests and style. These four possible approaches are simply illustrative of options. Strategically NVOC's brand is strengthened by having more linkages, of some degree, with more organizations. It would be advantageous, in fact, if NVOC could become the linchpin, or the 'go to' organization for any other agency that wants advice or help. This would help spread the NVOC message, potentially increase membership, and magnify its influence by giving it a voice through these other organizations. This approach would need care and safeguards, of course, to preserve NVOC's reputation and stature by avoiding contamination from agencies that are militant or that use methods deemed inappropriate.

Framework: Two Types

structure and pattern of activity or operating routine - are both ways with which a person identifies with an organization - when they are clear, logical, and consistent they can both add to the attraction of potential members, and sustain interest and support of current members.

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NVOC Organization. There has been some disruption in the establishment of units, regions, etc, that might be offputting for a potential member. Certainly my brief interaction with executives (and I did not focus questions on this area, I admit), leaves me ambivalent and uncertain about the effectiveness of the structure. There has clearly been a problem, and a remedy is now being implemented, but I am not sure of the depth or rigour of the review which led to this change, and I am unclear on how the new organization will actually work. If my lack of clarity is shared by any executives, this should be a warning that the organizational structure perhaps needs a closer examination. The optimal structure depends of course on fundamentals such as strategic aim, target audience for membership, but also on what routine activities are foreseen. So again with a chicken-and-egg situation: structure and operating routine are intertwined and must support each other.

NVOC Operating Routine. Again, this was not a focus of my questions, but I remain a bit unclear on what NVOC does, month in and month out. Do areas or units have monthly meetings, does the executive issue information or directives on a routine basis, etc. Perhaps some units or areas have their own campaigns or activities, and are obliged to report nationally at specific periods, etc. I likely missed it on the website, but administrative protocols such as election of officers and their responsibilities should be transparent to members.

Comment. Perhaps all necessary detail is present and well-known by members, and was just not apparent to me.

Conclusion

This scattered and subjective discussion is offered as a snapshot of impressions by a new member who was invited to meet with executives individually, and provide whatever feedback he thought relevant. Hopefully they will provide either fresh insights or generate new questions and discussions for the executive, in ways that will strengthen NVOC, and help it succeed.

A frequent re-examination of fundamental purpose, strategic aim, and subsidiary objectives is essential in any organization – and this needs to be tied to a precise analysis of who in particular the organization wants to serve, and attract as a member: these two questions are intertwined.

The name appears to be serving its purpose, but should be tested constantly with new and potential members – I feel it will become less and less attractive to succeeding cohorts of veterans, but acknowledge that it presently has established itself as a serious, non-confrontational advocate and advisor on veterans' issues.

All representatives need to be better prepared to tell any interlocutor what NVOC has accomplished, or what it is presently achieving or working towards.

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Serious thought needs to be given to relations with other veterans' organizations. If a firm policy presently exists, it needs to be supported fully by all executives, and especially by area or unit leaders, as they will circulate and meet other reps far from executive oversight. There is real potential in building stronger relationships with others, with some risk. Thus, if it is to happen, it must be done deliberately, within clear guidelines, and with strong protections or firewalls against damage to or dilution of the NVOC reputation which has already been established.

Some consideration might be given, before the organization gets significantly larger, to bringing more rigour and transparency to the organizational structure and operating routines of NVOC. This would guard against future dissent, and reduce the chance of a rogue element within the organization conducting affairs that harm the good name of the organization and the interests of those it was created to serve.

If these observations add any value to the work of NVOC, I will be pleased. If they generate any questions or need for amplification, I would be happy to discuss further.

Respectfully,

Ivan Fenton